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Senate Storms Over Helms' Letter to Globe Clears

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WASHINGTON — The Senate storm over a letter to The St. Louis Globe-Democrat by Central Intelligence Director Richard Helms blew itself out Friday and ended with expressions of confidence in Mr. Helms from even his severest critics.

After listening to Mr. Helms in closed session before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the chairman, Sen. J. W. Fulbright (Dem.), Arkansas, said he regards the letter episode as closed.

"Mr. Helms said the letter was a mistake and he apologized," Senator Fulbright told a news conference later.

"I can't say a man can't make a mistake. We all do."

In a letter to the Globe-Democrat, printed on Wednesday, CIA Chief Helms said he had been pleased to read an earlier editorial commending the CIA and denouncing Senator Fulbright for pushing a proposal for a new Senate committee to oversee the CIA.

The editorial, titled "Brickbats for Fulbright," called the Senator "crafty" and said the Senate had done the right thing in giving him "his comeuppance" and rejecting his proposal for the watchdog committee.

On Thursday, nine Senators, including Senator Fulbright, made speeches criticizing Mr. Helms as an executive branch official for supporting an editorial critical of a colleague.

Several Senators indicated they

were upset especially by the word "crafty" as applied to another member of their exclusive institution.

UPSHOT OF SPEECHES

The upshot of the speeches was the hurriedly called meeting of the Foreign Relations Committee to hear Mr. Helms say in person what he had said earlier by telephone to Senator Fulbright and others.

Every committee member emerging from the hearing said the air had been cleared by Mr. Helms' straight-forward statement that he had erred.

Mr. Helms' own comment to newsmen was simple this:

"I regret signing the letter. It was a mistake. I apologized for it."

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

According to Senator Fulbright, Mr. Helms gave these additional details at the hearing:

The letter had been proposed and drafted by an assistant.

When it was placed before Mr. Helms for signature, the anti-Fulbright editorial was attached, but Mr. Helms "focused" only on the parts commenting the CIA for its work.

The letter was included in a batch of personal mail being signed by Mr. Helms. But the letter to the Globe-Democrat was not marked personal and did not carry any admonition against

publication.

Senator Fulbright also quoted Mr. Helms as saying the CIA does not make a practice of praising or condemning newspaper editorials.

OBJECTED STRONGLY

In his speech Thursday, Senator Fulbright had also objected strongly to the editorial's unfavorable comments about him. But on Friday he professed to be unconcerned, saying:

"Editorials don't bother me. I get them in the local (Washington) papers just as bad as in St. Louis."

Sen. Wayne Morse (Dem.), Oregon, demanded Mr. Helms' resignation on the ground that he had intervened in domestic politics when he praised an editorial for its "abuse" of Senator Fulbright.

NO ENDORSEMENT

Sen. Morse was absent from the Senate committee hearing but had his statement read for him. No other Senator endorsed his demand for Mr. Helms' scalp, nor did any Senator even discuss such a step.

Several reporters pressed Sen. Fulbright to say that Mr. Helms had impaired his usefulness as CIA director, but the Senator declined, saying he was willing to forgive if not forget.

Sen. Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Democratic leader, took the same position. He said Mr. Helms, a career professional with the CIA, had taken office "with the best qualifications and ought to be given a chance."

He said that if a Senator had to resign for a "mistake," the Senate chamber would be empty.